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3 Evaluating the effects of a ‘student buddy’ initiative on student engagement and motivation

Anna Motzo¹

Abstract

Motivation is one of the most important factors which influences second language learning (Dörnyei, 1998; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). A support mechanism which reinforces student motivation through encouragement, social interaction, feedback, sound learning environments and good teaching is crucial for ensuring successful learning. This is particularly relevant in distance or online language learning settings, as learners work more autonomously and independently than in conventional classrooms and there is a higher risk of feeling isolated and not part of a well-defined and supportive learning community. This paper presents initial research conducted by the Department of Languages at the Open University to evaluate the efficacy of a peer-support initiative on level 1 modules where the drop-out rate is significant. The study is supported by both qualitative and quantitative evidence, which evaluates student engagement on the forum, the support mechanisms offered by elected peers and their role in building an online community.

Keywords: peer support, online community, student engagement, motivation, distance learning.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade we have witnessed a substantial increase in distance/online language courses enhanced by the use of technology. Learners who choose to study at a distance use electronic devices such as computers, tablets or mobile phones to access materials and take part in both synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. This learning model is suited to the needs of students who have to combine professional, family and academic roles as it provides a high degree of learning flexibility. Motivation is identified as one of the most influential factors in student satisfaction and attainment and current research suggests that distance learners are more intrinsically motivated, self-confident and self-directed than on campus students (Rovai, Ponton, Wighting, & Baker, 2007). However, research also shows that distance institutions face a significantly higher problem with student retention and that the drop-out rates are between 10 to 20 percent higher than in traditional settings (Carr, 2000). In other words, even though institutions are able to attract learners to distance programmes, they are not always able to retain them.

2. The context

The Open University (OU) is the largest UK based distance university. Language courses are modular and are based on an opt-in (rather than opt-out) system. In other words, students do not enrol on a programme *ab initio*, instead they choose a number of modules, the completion of which will lead to a particular qualification. (Coleman & Furnborough, 2010).

Although students are expected to study independently and autonomously and the in-house created course materials reflect and enhance this approach, there are also well structured support mechanisms: all students enrolled on a module are assigned to a tutor and join a tutor group of a maximum of twenty students; they can attend optional synchronous face to face and online sessions (delivered via a teleconference system) as well as participate in asynchronous communication via the tutor group forum. In addition, students can connect

with the wider module community via a (module) student forum, moderated by the module team.

In order to complete the module, students need to pass a certain number of written and spoken assignments as well as an ‘end-of-module’ exam. As might be expected, the attrition rate increases around assignment deadlines. This may be related to the main challenges faced by adult distance language learners such as:

- lack of opportunities to practise with others and share experiences;
- sense of isolation;
- increasing lack of confidence and motivation as the module progresses;
- perceived lack of informal ‘outside the classroom’ peer/social interaction.

3. The ‘student buddy’ initiative

In an attempt to improve student retention and indirectly address the above mentioned challenges, in 2013, the OU’s Department of Languages employed student buddies in *Intermediate* language modules to offer peer support via a designated forum thread prior to assignment deadlines. Following the pilot, in the academic year 2014-15, the initiative was extended to all level 1 language modules with the employment of one or two ‘student buddies’, depending on the module population.

The rationale of the initiative was:

- to offer students a friendly and supportive platform (through a dedicated thread in the student forum) for two weeks prior to each assignment deadline;

- to encourage learners through the presence of the student buddy to informally connect with peers and share ideas about how to tackle assignments;
- to help learners to maintain motivation as well as boost each other's confidence through mutual encouragement.

The buddies were former students who:

- had recently completed the module;
- were able to demonstrate a high degree of familiarity with the course materials;
- were competent users of IT tools;
- had excellent communication skills.

Buddies were recruited by the module chairs and received synchronous group online training. They were also supported throughout the year by the module chair through on-going feedback. Buddies were also able to support each other via their own web space and 'buddy forum'. They were expected to open a *sticky thread*² two weeks prior to each assignment and to check the thread at least once a day. They were required to send motivational messages, which included study tips, practical advice on where to find details on assignment tasks and to send reminders of completion dates and generally encouraging postings. An overview of the different student buddy-led threads indicates that the personal style adopted by the buddy in order to provide support was crucial to ensure the formation and development of an online community. Where the buddy's style tended to be more friendly and open, student engagement and participation was more active.

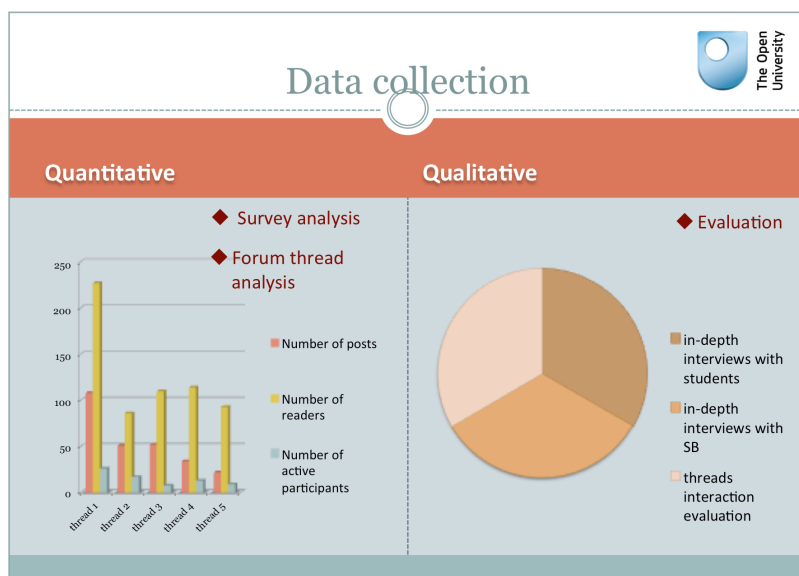
2. In the education software Moodle, the sticky discussion option can be used to pin a thread so that the pinned thread stays on the top of the list, even after newer discussions are posted.

An in-depth evaluation of whether the student buddy initiative on level 1 Language modules had a positive impact on student retention lies beyond the scope of this contribution and will be carried out elsewhere. The purpose of this paper is to present initial findings of the buddy initiative gathered from the *beginners'* modules and to evaluate whether it had a positive impact on increasing informal social cohesion.

4. Data collection and analysis

The study is based on a range of data collection methods such as student survey results, the analysis of one student forum (beginners' French), as well as in-depth interviews with both buddies and students, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Data collection



Initial findings from the all the *beginners'* surveys indicate that students highly valued the initiative, 92% and 82% respectively of the sample thought it was

good to have a student buddy and that it was helpful for moral support and reassurance and a substantial majority found it useful to clarify assignment requirements (64%) and that it was helpful in engendering a feeling of not being alone (66%).

The initial research also confirms the important role played by the buddy in building a sense of community.

Quotes from students:

“It puts a **personal face on the course** and helps students who want to get course **advice from a "friend"** yet at the same time, know that they are working in your best interest (where a real friend might accidentally push you in the wrong direction)”.

“**Those wanting support and feeling isolated** could find it useful”.

“**Might feel less alone** with the studying”.

“It may be **useful for people who have little contact with others** on their module, or those who are particularly nervous or stressed”.

“It provides extra help and **companionship** for the student”.

A close up of the beginners' French forum threads suggests four waves of student engagement:

I. Student buddy to whole group: student buddy sends general information, reminders of deadlines and general motivational messages as per briefing. Engenders a friendly atmosphere.

II. Student to student buddy: student asks practical and experiential questions, seeks feedback on his/her own approach and seeks general reassurance.

III. Student buddy to student: answers queries, provides *ad hoc* moral and practical support, boosts confidence, shares his/her own tacit knowledge.

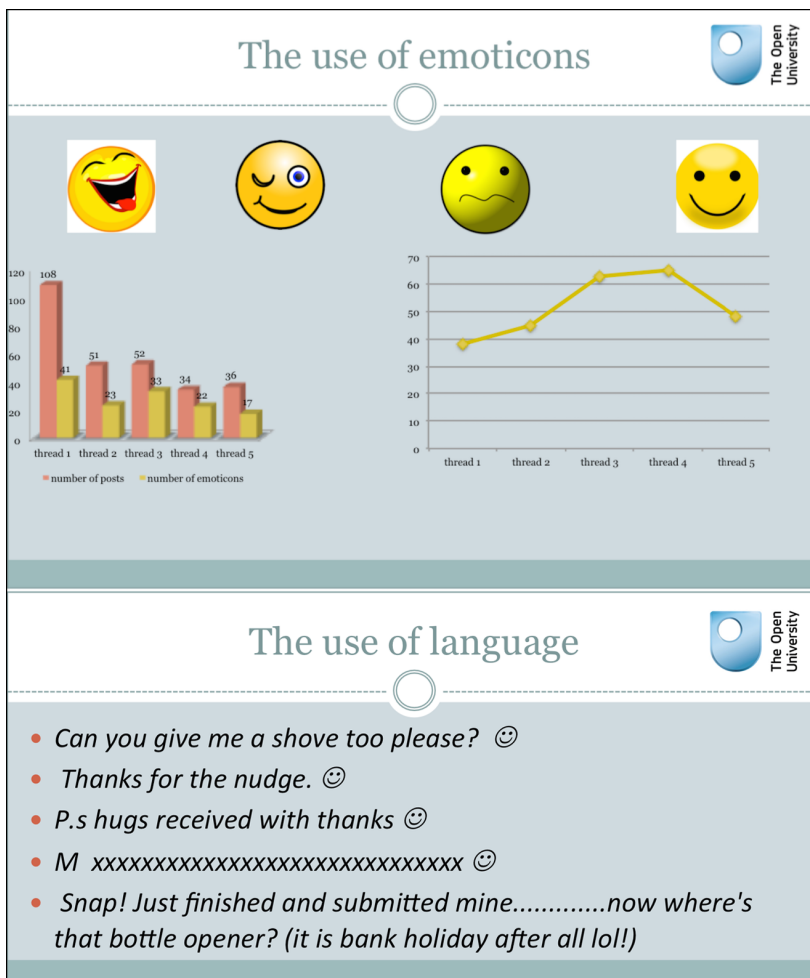
IV. Student(s) to student(s): respond to practical questions; boost each other's confidence and motivation, share ideas, feelings and build friendship.

It needs to be noted that not all the above mentioned elements were present from the beginning, on the contrary, a careful study of the threads shows a progressive transition from general, formal rather factual postings – mainly initiated by the student buddy – to more informal, colloquial and even spontaneous postings generated by all participants. As the time progressed, the participants in the thread became closer to each other and more open to sharing personal feelings related to the module (such as showing anxiety, sharing a sense of achievement and providing encouragement to others).

Participants were also keen to share personal anecdotes which exceeded the module-content (such as talking about the birth of a grand-daughter or the death of a dog, or the approaching holidays). It is also noteworthy that as the atmosphere became more friendly and colloquial, a number of peripheral participants, who hitherto had only read the forum without posting anything, progressively made the transition to become active participants, able and happy to share their views with others.

As the module progressed, signs that an online community had formed were also found. Evidence that participants mattered to each other (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), kept together in the pursuit of common goals (Westheimer & Kahne, 1993), and felt interdependent (Bellah et al., 1985) while developing a sense of friendship, bonding and trust, was also identified in the textual analysis. As the language used by the participants became more idiomatic, full of colloquialisms and more expressive with an increasing use of emoticons and symbols replacing words (Figure 2), the style adopted by the users mirrored that of informal social networks.

Figure 2. Textual analysis



5. Conclusion

When it comes to distance education, historically, too much emphasis has been placed on learner independence and autonomy and not enough on

interdependence and social presence. The student buddy scheme has been introduced to OU level 1 language modules as a retention initiative with the aim to provide students with peer support at crucial times. Conversely, a close analysis of the impact of this initiative on student engagement and motivation found that the presence of the buddy played a crucial role in enhancing social presence and team building with some positive effects on student satisfaction and persistence.

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